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ILLINOIS COUNCIL ON DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

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INVEST IN SUCCESS

ILLINOIS
COUNCIL ON DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES
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SUMMER 2002

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends,



There's nothing quite as empowering as taking charge of your future.

Looking ahead means making decisions about what you want in your life. It means setting goals and planning a course of action that will get you from Point A to Point B. It means reaching those goals and celebrating both the achievement and the road you took to get there. For many Illinois

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residents with developmental disabilities, that road has gotten a little easier recently. Increasingly, Illinois agencies are embracing a self-advocacy philosophy designed to help individuals with disabilities identify their strengths and dreams. The ultimate goal is to use this knowledge as a foundation for determining where to go next.

(continued on the next page)

Advocacy Investment Brings Widespread Change at Gateway

A new advocacy initiative is helping Gateway Services in Princeton, IL, to usher in remarkable change for people with developmental disabilities, their family members, and staff. The initiative, Abilities Unlimited, helps the people they support to make choices and changes in their lives through self-advocacy. One unique aspect to this investment is that self-advocacy efforts can be facilitated directly by other individuals with developmental disabilities who serve as mentors.

Staff members like Teams Consultant Vanessa Hoffeditz had high hopes for the initiative when it debuted in July 2001. Abilities Unlimited is rapidly living up to its name, opening doors to greater independence and control over life-choices for the people who receive services at Gateway. The initiative takes a comprehensive approach to bringing about change. “Teaching someone to advocate for themselves is an important step,” says Hoffeditz. “When you involve the people who surround them, you can dramatically increase your chances for success.” This multi-targeted approach to self-advocacy is key to delivering results at Gateway.

Training Initiative Involves Everyone at Gateway

First and foremost, the initiative involves self-advocates who want to make a change in their lives. These individuals are matched with a Gateway peer who serves as a mentor throughout the process. Each mentor works closely with his or her trainee, helping to identify desired areas of change and develop the skills necessary to accomplish that change.

“There's a wide range of skills that can be targeted,” explains Hoffeditz. “A participant may want to improve his abilities to communicate. Another might want to develop her assertiveness skills. The peer is there to help accomplish these tasks and, at the same time, provide support.”

Matching individuals seeking to make a change in their lives with peers is a key component in the process. “Along with the support they provide, they serve as role models,” says Hoffeditz. “A participant can look to his or her mentor and realize, ‘Hey, this person was successful and made a change. I bet I can do the same.’ Their involvement helps the individuals find their own voice and move forward towards change.”

Another group closely involved in the initiative is the Gateway staff. “We felt it was crucial that the attitudes, that the mindsets of our staff be changed or challenged on the issue of self-advocacy,” says Hoffeditz. “Sometimes in our system, staff members develop a tendency to act as caregivers. We see ourselves as the protector of the individual and, often, as the problem-solver. This approach can be an obstacle when you say you want to promote self-advocacy.” To encourage systemic change, says Hoffeditz, the agency worked on changing staff attitudes through training.

“Prior to launching this, we had no formal self-advocacy training at Gateway,”

(please see “Feature Story”
on the next page)

It's a powerful – and empowering – concept. This year, the Council is proud to count among its investment partners several agencies directly involved in self-advocacy efforts. In this issue of the newsletter, we'll share some of their success stories

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Advocacy in its many forms is a real force for change.

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with you, providing a firsthand look into how self-advocacy is reshaping the way agencies serve people with developmental disabilities and opening new doors for individuals.

Advocacy in its many forms is a real force for change. The Council remains committed to advocating to bring about change, better services and supports, and greater independence for all people in Illinois. From making investments in self-advocacy to educating the public on disability issues, each component of our advocacy effort is designed to help us “Value People/Invest in Success.”

Sincerely,



Sheila T. Romano, Ed.D.
Executive Director

Feature Story: Advocacy Investment Br

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according to Hoffeditz. “Now, it’s an expectation that our staff members will promote and support this kind of thinking. We’re doing everything we can to embrace self-advocacy. We’ve even incorporated some components of self-advocacy into performance evaluations for our staff. We ask, ‘Does this employee have good listening skills? Is he or she promoting decision-making while on the job?’” This ongoing attention is critical to fostering support for self-advocacy at the agency.

Finally, Abilities Unlimited involves family members and other people close to the self-advocate. Armed with a better understanding of the process, those family members and friends can help support the individual in their life who is working towards self-advocacy. “The process can often be unsettling to a family member or friend because the journey toward the goal can upset the balance and the status quo. We help them to prepare for this and to understand the shifting dynamics,” explains Hoffeditz.

Self-Advocates Achieve Success Quickly

When Gateway set its goals for the project, the agency hoped ultimately to see 35 individuals make a change in their life as a result of Abilities Unlimited. Ten months into the project, Hoffeditz projects they will have a far greater impact than that. “Right now we have 27 individuals striving toward making a change – one they’ve defined themselves – in their life. Already, eight people have shown success based on their own definition. The successes are coming very quickly.”

Gloria Lietzau, who receives CILA (Community Integrated Living Arrangement) services at Gateway, wanted greater control over her spending money. Her experiences in handling money in the past had caused some problems and agency staff had assumed responsibility for the task. After meeting with her mentor, Gloria presented her idea for making a change in her own life.

She was ready to try managing her own money again. Demonstrating responsibility with her own money, she decided, would be a step in the direction of greater independence. Gloria called a meeting with staff and presented her plan for change. She acknowledged her problems with money in the past, but reiterated her commitment to giving it another shot. Today, she’s back in control of her finances – a little nervous about her abilities to manage money successfully – but feeling a sense of accomplishment about her courage to give it a try.

Charlie Young, another self-advocate at Gateway, is helping the agency to reshape its own policies. Traditionally, job developers from the agency have taken the lead when it comes to interfacing with employers and identifying opportunities in the community. After doing the legwork, agency staff members meet with individuals to discuss the options they’ve uncovered. But for this young man, that route just didn’t seem to measure up.

As part of his Abilities Unlimited training, Charlie had resolved that it wasn’t enough simply to have someone else find him a job. He wanted to play a primary role in the job search process. “The level of involvement he sought was new to us,” explains Hoffeditz. “No one had ever asked for that before, so the request threw us a little bit. It forced us to think about how we typically do things. He really challenged us to examine our routines and to think more openly about how we accomplish our objectives.”

Charlie is still in search of the perfect full-time job. In the meantime, he’s applied the skills he learned while out in the field with the job developer to build his own network of work contacts. He’s gained self-confidence, enthusiasm, and business savvy. He’s used these new skills to pick up a variety of odd jobs around the community. “Charlie wasn’t going to wait around for the perfect opportunity to present itself,” says

ings Widespread Change at Gateway

Hoffeditz. "He took it into his own hands to get out there, make contacts, and line up work for himself. And he's so excited about what he's accomplished on his own!"



Wayne Whalen, a Gateway mentor, teaches peers to use self-advocacy to "seize the day."

Shaping the Agency's Future

Getting Abilities Unlimited launched has been a rewarding process, but it wasn't without its own unique challenges. "We are really building our own model here," explains Hoffeditz. "The 'vision' hasn't changed, but the process we've used to get there is quite different than we had first imagined." Recruiting participants went more slowly than anticipated, but the agency has devised new strategies for doing so.

"This was also a great exercise in how to make self-advocacy happen. We learned how to instill a philosophy of self-advocacy and how to train others to embrace it," explains Hoffeditz. "But just because you teach someone to advocate for himself doesn't mean that person can teach self-advocacy to others.

There's much more to it than that. We also struggled with how we would know what success looked like," says Hoffeditz. "We needed to find a way to measure skills and competencies for both mentors and staff," says Hoffeditz. "Eventually, it clicked that we could use the same means to evaluate success for both groups." Today, Gateway uses role-playing, observation, and customer satisfaction tactics to evaluate progress.

These learnings have produced change — and not just for the self-advocates. "We've learned so much about ourselves as an agency," claims Hoffeditz. "This new approach is becoming a way of life for what we do. It's opened our eyes to how much further we could embrace this approach in our own work and our mission."

In years past, the individuals receiving support at Gateway have had a formal opportunity to articulate goals and desires to staff members at twice-yearly meetings. "All of the sudden, we've noticed that the feedback is much more informative, probably because of the influence of the peer relationships that have been developed," says Hoffeditz. "With mentor support, we're also seeing that individuals are going to their case managers more frequently. They're requesting meetings with staff so that they can check on our progress. We're being held to greater accountability than ever before."

"This investment has truly made us look at ourselves as an agency and at how we do business," according to Hoffeditz. "At Gateway, we've always thought of ourselves as pretty progressive. Now, the individuals we support are challenging us to do even more to foster independence. It's an amazing change and a positive one. It's all about empowering people to make change in their lives." ■

PERSON-CENTERED PLANNING OPENS NEW DOORS

At an agency in Champaign, housing for people with developmental disabilities is the focus of a Council investment, but self-advocacy plays a starring role. That's by design, explains Laura Bennett at Developmental Services Center (DSC). When applying to the Council's Call for Investment, the agency decided it wanted to get both staff and the individuals they support thinking differently. To facilitate person-centered planning, they included a significant self-advocacy component in their proposal. Since launching the project in November, the agency has trained nearly 100 staff members and held multiple sessions for people with developmental disabilities served by DSC.

Although the project is relatively new, Bennett says the agency "has already had lots of positive feedback from people who are participating. Our case managers are learning how to think differently about how they serve the individuals we support. The people we support, in turn, are starting to advocate for themselves and are becoming more open about expressing their desires. They're becoming more invested in their goals and objectives because they've taken the lead in setting them." One recently trained self-advocate is taking action steps to move out of his supported apartment building and into a home in the community. Another has assumed the role of neighborhood activist and is putting pressure on local officials to improve road and sidewalk conditions by his apartment building. A third is hoping simply to do some redecorating in her home. All in all, says Bennett, "It's been a very wonderful opportunity for everyone involved."

A longer-term goal of the project is to develop a greater range of local housing options for individuals with disabilities. "We want to open new doors in the community and encourage the individuals we support to feel like they can ask for more. Our ultimate goal is to change our culture. We want to be an agency where individuals can dare to dream, where quality of life is central to everything we do." ■



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Attention Public Schools: Council Seeks Partners in Inclusive Schools Initiative

Increasing opportunities for children with developmental disabilities to learn in inclusive classrooms is the focus of another Call for Investment (CFI) just announced by the Council. At its May 9 meeting, the Council put out the call for proposals for the "Building Inclusive Schools" CFI. It's not the first time the Council has sought investment partners to accomplish this goal, but the agency hopes to attract a broader range of proposals this time around.

"We hope to connect with investment partners in many public school districts - including schools in urban, suburban and rural areas of the state," says Council Director of Programs and Planning Sandy Ryan. Successful proposals will outline strategies for increasing the number of students in inclusive educational environments

and increasing the number of teachers trained to support students with disabilities in "general education" classrooms.

Jennifer Harrison, the Council's Investment Coordinator, explains that this latest CFI is one that should be considered by all districts: "No matter the size of the school district, we are interested in hearing from you. It's also important to emphasize that this CFI is open to all schools, regardless of past progress. This investment can help your local schools take the first steps toward inclusion. Or, it can help a district that's already made great strides to expand its boundaries."

The Council is asking newsletter readers to help spread the word about this CFI. "Even if you're a parent whose child has long since graduated,

we still hope you'll act on this information," says Ryan. "Pass this along to your local school and ask them to look into it. If you have friends who are teachers or school board members, mention it. This is an opportunity to bring about real change in your community."

The Council is prepared to invest up to several hundred thousand dollars to achieve the goals of this CFI. To encourage applications, the response period has been extended from two to four months. Applications are due on September 30.

To receive a copy of this or any other CFI, contact the receptionist at either Council office. If you have a specific question about any CFI or about the CFI process, please call Jennifer Harrison at (217) 782-9696. ■